

Greg Sarris. *How a Mountain was Made: Stories*. Berkeley: Heyday, 2017. 303 pp. ISBN: 978-1-59714-414-8.

<https://heydaybooks.com/book/how-a-mountain-was-made/>

Greg Sarris's new collection, comprised of pieces originally published in the tribal newsletter of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria (of which he has been the long-time chairman), is a somewhat difficult volume to categorize. The book brings together a series of retellings of Miwok stories about their traditional homeland on and around Sonoma Mountain in Northern California. Each of its sixteen chapters is framed and introduced by conversations between Question Woman and Answer Woman, twin crows and daughters of Coyote, who engage in the on-going work of co-creation through their deeply reciprocal relationship. Question Woman can remember nothing, and thus finds herself compelled to constantly interrogate her companion. Answer Woman knows everything but is unable to call that knowledge to mind without being asked. Together, then, these twins jointly recall and reproduce the place-specific knowledge of the coastal Miwok. They do so in a book that, stylistically and structurally, initially presents itself as a work targeted toward young adults. Beneath its relatively simple façade, however, *How a Mountain was Made* explores the complexities and depth of the Miwok episteme in a manner that will reward multiple readings on a number of levels. Sarris's book resists conventional marketing categories, then, but it does so precisely because of how effectively it translates the power of traditional storytelling into a contemporary idiom. Not unlike his earlier non-fiction work, *Mabel McKay: Weaving the Dream*, this work challenges preconceptions about where knowledge lives and how it becomes, and remains, active in the world.

The very first story in the collection, "The Pretty Woman and the Necklace," offers an excellent example of the subtleties of Sarris's work in his retellings. On the one hand, this is a simple didactic tale about vanity, the story of a Miwok woman who, in search of a way to stand out to a potential suitor, recruits the help of Bear, Cooper's Hawk, and Fly to craft a necklace of colored stones taken from the slopes of Sonoma Mountain. As one might expect, this project proves to be her undoing, alienating her from her own people and herself as she becomes increasingly obsessed with adornment, regardless of the cost to her relations or to the land. But as is generally the case with traditional stories, Sarris's tale contains a number of other elements within it—elements echoed by the brilliant stones embedded on the mountain side in the narrative itself. (This type of symbolic reinforcement of theme appears throughout the collection, reminding us of Sarris's literary training and background as a wonderful novelist and short story writer; when Question Woman and Answer woman sit on a fence to talk, in other words, we are generally aware that this is both a literal and a metaphorical space.) In the story of "The Pretty Woman," readers will encounter implicit lessons regarding the appropriate and respectful manner of asking for help in need, as opposed to the use of manipulation and flattery to achieve self-serving ends. Sarris's characters directly model appropriate and inappropriate behavior in other words. Sarris also incorporates numerous songs into the tale, reminding readers that each being of creation has its own power that should be respected and understood (in non-appropriative ways). He offers a compelling narrative account, as well, of how the relatively benign self-centeredness of youth (a phase through which all people pass) can transform into an ethos of domination. And he engages

in the vital work of place-making, tying all these narrative elements to their discrete localities. Sarris's writing is littered with place names, and in this respect his book invites readers to develop an awareness of how closely Miwok identity is connected to the geography of Northern California.

It is noteworthy too, considering the contemporary political context in which tribal communities operate and Sarris' own experiences as tribal chairman, that *How a Mountain Was Made* includes several stories that deal explicitly with the nature and challenges of leadership. Coyote is a central figure in a number of tales, and one of the most striking aspects of his appearance in those contexts is his imperfection--as well as his ability to grow through experience to compensate for those imperfections. In "Coyote Creates a Costume Fit for a Chief," our protagonist's insecurity and egotism cause him to turn away from the centering wisdom offered by his wife, Frog Woman, a Dreamer whose visions guide the people in such vital pursuits as the gathering of food and recognition of when and where to hunt. Misunderstanding the importance for all members of the community to play their particular roles for the collective good, Coyote grows unhappy at what he sees as the people's lack of appreciation for him. This propels him in his misguided desire for an elaborate costume that will draw attention back to himself. Of particular note in this story, however, is the fact that while those members of the community he enlists to help him in his quest recognize his folly and disapprove, they allow him to make his own missteps and learn from those mistakes. By the end of the tale, Coyote's actions have inadvertently changed the world (transforming Lizard, Rattlesnake, Quail, and Dragonfly into their present forms). He has also learned that that all he truly needed to be an effective leader was his "Chief's Song." But while it initially appears that Coyote's folly has led to the loss of that song, what his nephew Chicken Hawk and wife Frog Woman reveal is that his actions have merely served to disperse it into all of the "secret objects" he requested for his costume. In this respect, we realize, Coyote's folly and subsequent growth ushers in new forms of ceremony, while also serving to reinforce the idea that wise leadership diffuses throughout the people rather than residing with a single dominant figure. If Coyote still howls in shame at night in remembering his errors, then, that memory has no negative impact on the community's overall safety and happiness. Indeed, Sarris ends this story by noting that "the ceremony turned out beautifully" (118).

It has been almost twenty years since we've had a new book from Greg Sarris. *How A Mountain Was Made* is, perhaps, not what readers might have expected from him in his return to print. However, long-time readers of his work will easily discern in the book the narrative gifts and the careful depiction of key themes (particularly regarding the relationship between song, power, place and being) that run throughout his oeuvre. And new readers should appreciate his skillful ventriloquism of Question Woman and Answer Woman and the great care he has taken to highlight the profundity that resides in the stories that continue to create and map the Miwok homeland.

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